

EcoComplex Taking Shape at 1,000-Acre Catawba Site

By Ken Elkins

Catawba County is developing an ecologically minded industrial park where companies will use each other's production wastes and byproducts to fuel their operations.

Planners believe the Catawba County EcoComplex has the potential to attract \$105 million in investment and create as many as 350 jobs over the next five years.

Gregory Wood Products, Inc., a \$20 million high-tech sawmill, is already in operation at the county-owned park with about 60 employees. Pallet One Inc., a wood pallet maker that will use Gregory's Lumber and share wood drying kiln with the sawmill, is planning a \$2.5 million facility nearby that will have 35 workers.

And a third company, Greenhouse Inc., is nearing a decision to open a \$25 million hydroponics operation that would supply vegetables to Dole Food Co.'s \$54 million salad packaging facility that's under construction in Gaston County.

Local officials hint that a \$1.5 million decorative-brick operation also is considering building in EcoComplex to take advantage of the park's renewable-energy strategy.

Eventually, all companies in the 1,000-acre park—being developed at the Blackburn Landfill site off U.S. Highway 321—will be interdependent for at least part of their fuel needs or for reuse of byproducts.

For example, scrap lumber from Gregory's and Pallet One's operations will be burned to produce steam that will be used to heat Greenhouse's plant-growing buildings. The steam will also power wood kilns to cure timbers at Gregory and pallets at Pallet One, as well as to harden clay products at the brick plant.

Greywater—partially treated water from a planned sludge plant site—will be used in Greenhouse's hydroponics. And lead plants from the greenhouses will be used as fuel in the steam-generation operation. In turn, carbon dioxide from that operation will be used to spend the growth of Greenhouse plants.

The EcoComplex venture is based on the idea that "one man's trash is another man's treasure," says Scott Millar, President of Catawba County's Economic Development Corp. "It's green all the way around."

Says Barry Edwards, Director of the Catawba County Utilities and Engineering Department: One plant's "waste becomes someone's commodity."

While the park is the early stages of development, it already produces \$600,000 in electric power each year, fueled by methane gas from the Landfill. That power was sold to Duke Energy Corp. at a \$250,000 profit in 2005.

Steve Randall, operations manager of the Gregory Wood Products facility, says the self-contained aspect of the EcoComplex will cut fuel and transportation costs by drying lumber on site instead of shipping it to other company kilns. "It turns out to be a good idea for all of us."

The EcoComplex will help prove that "renewable energy can be an economic driver in the state," says Dennis Grady, a political science professor and director of Appalachian State University's Energy Center.

A 200-acre public golf course also is proposed, using sod to be supplied by Catawba Valley Community College's planned turf-grass management program.

ASU students are writing a case study on the park. And ASU and Catawba Valley want to team up to provide students with research opportunities in green energy and environmental innovation.

Says Grady: The "landfill is a great laboratory."